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ABSTRACT

The ability to communicate in a foreign language requires more than linguistic accuracy. To understand and be understood by others requires the ability to recognize cultural differences. For example, polite behavior in one language may not be the social equivalent in another language. In order to acquire cultural competence, students have to become familiar with the cognitive, affective, and behavioral facets of politeness. By building a cultural politeness mandate at every step in the acquisition of lexical and grammatical forms, the organizing principle of the language curriculum is redefined. This requires moving the learner from habitual learning to skilled learning. Rather than a grammatical or functional syllabus, a contextual syllabus should be considered through which learners can gradually acquire the ability to reflect on how the choice of language in spoken and written discourse defines and is determined by personal relationships, social situations, and cultural presuppositions. In Europe, as in the United States, the foreign language teaching profession is anxious to enhance the cross-cultural awareness of language teachers. Because there is much more to cultural competence than linguistic proficiency, the time has come to make students aware of what they are doing and of the power they have to contribute to or change the social context. The next step on the foreign language educational agenda is: Politeness--a cultural and social construct that requires cognitive and affective maturity, and the concomitant ability to make behavioral choices. (Author/JL)

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PROFICIENCY PLUS: THE NEXT STEP

ERIC DIGEST

BY CLAIRE KRAMSCH

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Digest

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Proficiency Plus: The Next Step

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This Digest is drawn from an article published in *Penn Language News* (Number 7, Spring 1993).

While literary studies are diversifying their literary base and often renaming themselves "cultural studies," language study is increasingly viewed as providing not only points of contact with native speakers but privileged access to their way of thinking—to their culture. Nostrand (1991) wrote that proficiency in a foreign language means "effective communication [which] involves not only exchanging verbal messages but *creating rapport, eliciting respect and good will.*" He goes on to say that this requires "accurate as well as fluent language . . . [supported by] (1) a knowledge of the culture and society expected of the outsider by a native speaker . . .; (2) a knowledge of how to observe and analyze a culture . . . ; and (3) the sociolinguistic ability to interact, to perceive nonverbal messages." Underlying these abilities is an essential prerequisite that Nostrand calls "empathy toward other cultures and perspective on one's own."

Empathy vs. Politeness

Clearly one of the goals of learning a foreign language is to be able to communicate—to understand and be understood by native speakers of the language. For that, linguistic accuracy is not enough. One would hope that learners could develop the "capacity to participate in another's feelings or ideas" and gain empathy toward members of another culture, but empathy is a personal feeling of solidarity, not a social capacity. When we talk about culture, we are talking about the ability to understand and be understood by others as members of a given discourse community, not as isolated individuals. Rather than the personal term empathy, the correlate social concept of politeness is used here to discuss the ability to see the world from another person's perspective. The notion of politeness stresses the social nature of interpersonal relationships and their cultural relativity: what might be polite behavior to Americans may have a very different value for the French or Germans, even though they may all be empathic individuals.

To illustrate, Judy, a young American student returning from a stay with a German family, complained that she never found out how to say "I'm sorry" in German. For instance, she would enter the living room where the father was sitting, and he would ask her to close the door. As she would go to close the door, she would feel like saying, "Oh, I'm sorry," as she was used to doing at home, to show her sensitive attention to the other family members' needs. However, *entschuldigen Sie bitte* (please forgive me) seemed inappropriate, *Verzeihung* (excuse me) seemed too conventional, and *Es tut mir leid* (I'm sorry) seemed excessive. So what should she say?

In English, Judy intuitively sensed that the situation called for "I'm sorry," but she felt awkward replicating the text of prior similar situations in her own family. This situation seemed to call for a different response in German.

Because closing the door is not part of a clear-cut set of conventional social rules in American society, the situation Judy found herself in clearly required in English a more personal "I'm sorry." But Judy was in Germany, and she sensed that the German situation did not call for personal attention to another person's feelings or needs. Rather, closing the door behind you when you enter a room seemed to be the socially appropriate thing to do in Germany. Thus, a personal expression of concern could indeed have been viewed as inappropriate, and the father would have interpreted it as a puzzling expression of guilt on the part of a foreigner. But Judy wanted to be polite and considerate.

Now one could argue that by treating the context as personal rather than social, Judy was inserting a text from a different context of culture into the new situation—in effect, switching genres. She was making a breach into a view of German culture perceived and presented by the father as a monolithic consensual social affair. By personally excusing herself for having left the door open, the student was making a statement about the relative distribution of person-oriented vs. societally-oriented behaviors in German speech communities and, thereby, for a fleeting moment, changing the cultural equation. It could thus be argued that it was legitimate for her to behave as an American in this German situation (Kramsch, 1993a).

This microexample shows what is at stake if one sets out to teach politeness in a foreign language. Whether in contacts with foreign cultures abroad or through encounters with foreign cultures at home, our students will not be spared Judy's unsettling experience of realizing that their personal and social self, which they had up to now viewed as nicely welded together, can be dissociated. This realization is the first step to understanding the arbitrary and socially constructed link between language and culture.

The question is of course: How do we enrich linguistic competence with cultural competence? Or, more broadly stated, now that our students can talk, how do we make sure they talk "politely?"

What is Politeness?

For foreign language teachers, as the example illustrates, the concept is culturally relative. The French *poli* may be the semantic but not the social equivalent of the German *hoflich* or English *polite*. Polite behavior in one culture may be viewed as impolite in another. Because it represents the way in which people in conversation co-construct the social context in which they are operating, it must be defined in interactional terms and cannot be codified in advance.

As a *cognitive* ability, politeness is related to a knowledge of customs--social conventions of verbal and non-verbal behavior--as well as an understanding of what constitutes the memory of a people and its history. This ability refers both to the target and to one's native culture. In fact, many aspects of one's own culture can only become apparent through contrast with another.

As an *affective* capacity, politeness entails the ability to see oneself and others in a decentered perspective. One can "know one's place" only in relation to other places that others occupy and that one

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could have occupied. A decentered perspective allows one to objectify and thus have a grasp on the more universal dimensions of politeness identified by Brown and Levinson (1978): power, distance, and degree of imposition and how they are differently realized in different discourse communities.

Finally, as a *behavioral* phenomenon, politeness is a certain pragmalinguistic competence based on a mutually agreed upon definition of the situation and a personal decision to abide by the rules or to flout them.

Cognitive, affective, and behavioral components of politeness constitute what foreign language educators call cultural competence. Each of these components has its own mode of acquisition. Cognitive ability can best be developed via observation and analysis, given the appropriate linguistic and ethnographic tools to do so. A decentered attitude can be fostered through interpretation skills and training in the critical reading of spoken and written texts. Behavioral competence is best exercised in face-to-face interaction with native speakers or opportunities for social performance.

In all its facets--cognitive, affective, and behavioral--politeness is an interactional ability, to shape and activate contexts of language use that either perpetuate or change the social status quo.

Curricular Implications

By building a cultural politeness mandate at every step in the acquisition of lexical and grammatical forms, the organizing principle of the language curriculum is redefined. No longer does the grammatical structure nor the functional-notional speech item form the basis for curricular progression, but the interaction of these forms with context determines their use. Some might argue that this is what language pedagogy has tried to do in the last 20 or 30 years: move the learner from habitual learning (learning forms in single contexts of occurrence) to skilled learning (the ability to adapt to different contexts of use). In both cases, language pedagogy has traditionally viewed context as a fixed, stable affair that is separate from language. If, however, we accept that language is more than linguistic forms, and context is more than just a frame that surrounds talk, then it is more appropriate to take a sociolinguistic view of language as a kind of social practice that both constructs world knowledge and reflects that knowledge.

Rather than a straightforward grammatical or functional syllabus, we should think of a contextual syllabus, one through which learners gradually acquire not only the ability to produce and understand the forms of the language but the capacity to reflect on how the choice of these forms in spoken and written discourse both defines and is determined by personal relationships, social situations, and cultural presuppositions.

One could envisage sequencing pedagogic tasks in order of increasing contextual complexity. At every step, however, language instruction must be viewed as the exercise of a social practice whose purpose is to bring to consciousness the relationship between the foreign language students' use in class and their own social environment as well as the relationship between the foreign language and the social environment in which it is spoken by native speakers.

Language teachers often feel that such a conscious reflection cannot take place in language classes because students do not have the necessary linguistic ability in the foreign language. The difficulty is not really a linguistic one, but rather the near total lack of experience among both teachers and learners for talking about talk, and the disciplinary conspiracy of silence surrounding the idea that language actually constitutes social reality.

Implications for Training Teachers

In Europe, as in the United States, the foreign language teaching profession is anxious to enhance the cross-cultural awareness of language teachers. A project, sponsored by the European Community organization LINGUA, is currently comparing the cultural training of French teachers in England, France, Ireland, Portugal, Spain, and the United States. What impact does the institutional culture of the various school systems have on the cultural assumptions of language teachers? How and from what sources have language teachers developed their understanding of the target culture? What tools can be made available to them to analyze their and their students' representations of francophone societies? The final report should offer teachers guidelines as to how to enhance their understanding of the link between the language and the culture they teach.

The Goethe Institute has sponsored cross-cultural seminars that bring together teachers of French, German, and English from the United States, Germany, and France to compare the cultural materials they choose to represent the target culture. These seminars provide a fertile ground for future research into the resolution of cross-cultural misunderstandings across languages (Kramsch, 1993b).

In the United States, the Committee on Cultural Competence of the American Association of Teachers of French National Commission on Professional Standards has been working to define a common core of cultural competence.

Conclusion

There is much more to cultural competence than linguistic proficiency. So much more, in fact, that some foreign language teachers throw up their arms in despair and yearn for the days of the canned dialogue and the pattern drill. Rather than look back, the time has come to take the next step. The proficiency movement has had the great advantage of providing a social context for students' utterances; now is the time to make students aware of what they are doing and of the power they have to contribute to or to change that social context. The next step on the foreign language educational agenda is: Politeness—a social and cultural construct that requires cognitive and affective maturity, and the concomitant ability to make behavioral choices. Politeness is another term for cultural competence: a combination of knowledge of the world and of one's own and others' places in this world, a decentered attitude vis-a-vis one's own and other cultures, and a type of behavior that both conforms to social conventions and creates its own.

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